A CINEMA OF THE EAR: HOLLIS FRAMPTON'S *SPECIAL EFFECTS*

Given the unique opportunity to participate in this conference devoted to the work of Hollis Frampton, I have decided to focus my talk here on some general and historical shared concerns in experimental music and film – with the hope of highlighting a cross-fertilization, an intermediality, and a convergence of the histories of electronic / experimental / avant-garde music and experimental cinema – which culminate in the final segment of Frampton's Hapax Legomena cycle, *Special Effects*, a film that projected, upon its completion in early 1972, a synthesized, speculative, and ambiguous look into the future of cinema.

Sound is typically ignored, or at best, underrepresented in the critical literature on experimental cinema. One of the rare exceptions to this absence is Melissa Ragona's essay, "Hidden Noise: Strategies of Sound Montage in the Films of Hollis Frampton", published by *October* in the Summer of 2004. My project here is inspired, in part, by her article, which drew me to look closely at the use of sound in a few of Frampton's films that didn't make it into her analysis – particularly those that don't contain spoken voices or language. This talk is also deeply indebted to, and really wouldn't have been possible without, the meticulous and insightful work of Scott MacDonald, whose lengthy interviews with Frampton from the 1970's have been an invaluable resource, and the thoughtful and inspiring work of my colleague Ken Eisenstein.

I don't want to overlook the importance of Frampton's work with language, speech, and the voice, but I do want to draw out an alternative way of thinking about his sound films from the early 1970's that looks to musical structures and the implications of noise and improvisation, rather than language, as providing a kind of methodological framework.

Hollis Frampton, *Zorns Lemma* (1970)

Underlying the idea that new sounds have the possibility of projecting a sort of new mode of audition as well as a new model for creating or generating meaning, his use of musical structuring procedures in films like *States* (1967) and *Heterodyne* (1967) was certainly influenced by his New York contemporaries LaMonte Young and Tony Conrad,

who produced works starting in the early 1960's that evoked a complex set of relations between tones, as well as a re-evaluation of the standard harmonic series.

The overwhelming influence of John Cage, of course, cannot be under-estimated. In discussing the use of darkness in his early films, Frampton says,

> "I don't see why, just because you *can* be seeing something all the time, you *must* be seeing something all the time. I've called these passages silences; in doing so, I indicate a debt to Cage. Cage proposed that just because you could be hearing something all the time, didn't mean that you had to be. That struck me as a strategic option in film. In any case, because film stock is not truly opaque, you are always seeing something, the outline of the frame at least, and that itself is an enormous cultural icon: it tells you where the image would be if there were one."[1]

Tracing an annotated history of the convergences between the historical concerns of experimental music and cinema necessitates moving swiftly through the theories of radical sound and image montage deployed by filmmakers as varied as Vertov, Eisenstein, and Deren, and described in the famous "Statement on Sound" signed by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov in 1928 as the a-synchronous relation between images and sounds --- through the incorporation of so-called extra-musical sounds and noise into the realm of music and film --- to the work being done in synthetic or generated sound by filmmakers such as Len Lye, Oscar Fischinger, Norman McLaren, Moholy-Nagy, Barry Spinello, and Robert Russett – to name a few – who directly manipulated or animated the optical soundtrack to *create* sounds, or in the case of

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[1] Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 34.

master inventors John and James Whitney, worked to create what they called a bi-sensory relationship between film and music with the invention of their pendulum sound generator.

Working with predetermined notions of what music was and was not, early avant-garde sound practice asked what sort of extra-musical sounds should be incorporated into the avant-garde, and how – and the strategy that first propelled musical practice into the realm of the greater modernist avant-garde was the progressive incorporation of extra-musical sounds into the circumscribed materials of was considered to be musical.

One of the earliest examples of an attempt to theorize this sort of all-inclusive sound practice is found in Luigi Russolo's Futurist manifesto, *The Art of Noises*, published in 1913. Russolo envisioned a new form of musical practice that would combine all of the various sounds of human existence, and argued that traditional musical instruments were no longer capable of capturing the essence of modern life. His noise instruments, in-ton-aru-mori, were capable of producing a variety of different timbres and pitches – some which resembled the sounds of nature and of modern life and some which were entirely new – with the aim of developing a musical palette that would allow the composer to capture the energy, speed, and noise that were a part of every aspect of modern life at the turn of the century.

Russolo's manifesto anticipated larger musical and aesthetic concerns that would be taken up by avant-garde art movements in the future, and expressed what would come

to be the explicit aim of movements like musique concrete – to compose symphonies out of the sounds of everyday life. That said, in short, it was the technological advancement of the cinema, specifically the advent of the sound film, that signaled the decline of Russolo's career. His rumorarmonio instruments, based on the earlier intonarumori, had the capacity to imitate water, wind, and animals, and Russolo aimed to market them for use in silent film accompaniment. The development of sound film rendered them quickly obsolete.

Edgar Varèse's "liberation of sound" took up Russolo's interest in noise, and Varèse, describing himself as working in rhythms, frequencies, and intensities, called for an entirely new medium of expression: a sound-*producing* machine. This call for a sound-generating machine was answered in the development of electronic music by the invention of the valve oscillator in 1915, and the subsequent invention of the Theremin in 1919/20. Varèse believed that the development of these new tools would prevent him from "submitting" to sounds that he had already heard and he was one of the first composers to recognize that the natural progression of avant-garde music would lead to the use of electronics.

Varèse hoped that film studios would take the lead in building laboratories for the development of electronic music, and in 1940 wrote to a Hollywood producer outlining his ideas for the exploration of the new potential of optical sound recording technology. His suggestions were disregarded by Hollywood, and the first electronic music studios were constructed by European radio stations. Electronic music centers soon developed

in North America – The Cooperative Studio for Electronic Music was founded in Ann

Arbor in 1958, the Mark II synthesizer was acquired by the Columbia-Princeton Music

Center at its inception in 1959 – and it's also worth mentioning the electronic scoring

and sound effect work done by Louis and Bebe Barron in New York in the 1950's, the

inventions and compositions of Raymond Scott, Pauline Oliveros and all of the work

happening at the San Francisco Tape Music Center, and the development of the Moog

and Buchla synthesizers, among others.

It is the Buchla synthesizer, commissioned by Ramon Sender and Morton Subotnick in

1963 (and which Subotnick would go on to use in his first major electronic composition,

"Silver Apples Of the Moon") - in fact, just *one* Buchla synthesizer - located in Pittsburgh

in 1971 - that brings me back to Frampton.

Frampton's serial film, *Hapax Legomena* (1971-1972), running nearly 3 and a half hours

in length and consisting of seven discrete parts, derives it's title from what Frampton

calls, "Greek scholarly jargon. It means, 'said one time.' It refers to words that are

found but once in the entire corpus of a literature – they are always very problematic

because it is difficult to say what a hapax legomena means. You only have one context,

so the denotation of the word is always conjectural."[2]

Hapax Legomena has been thought of as tracing out - both a sort of reflexive history of

the development of modern art practice (via the most technologically complex and

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[2] Peter Gidal, "Interview with Hollis Frampton," *October 32* (Spring 1985), 103.

advanced modern art medium – the cinema), as well as the development of Frampton's

own coming into an artistic consciousness. As Frampton has suggested of the work, it's

project is one in which he hoped to "recapitulate some of the history of film art as though

it were my own life to recollect."[3]

Each of the components of *Hapax Legomena* is commonly read as isolating a

fundamental and unique, yet interdependent and determined aspect of the ontology of

cinema. If we think of Frampton's films as embedded in this metahistorical project, in

part they isolate the essential elements and basic structuring principles of what it is that

makes up the cinema: light, narrative, movement, memory, etc. Is it possible then, to

think of Frampton's *sound* films as engaged in a similar project, as he said, "to

reconstruct the history of films as it 'should have been'"[4] – moving in an arc from

Maxwell's Demon (1968), whose images are accompanied by the interspersed sound of

8mm sprocket holes, what Frampton describes as "the first sound that film ever made

which is the sound of film itself"[5] through the mismatched talkies *(nostalgia)* (1971) and

Critical Mass (1971), parts 1 and 3 of *Hapax Legomena*, and, in 1972, arriving at the

seventh and final part of *Hapax Legomena, Special Effects*.

As described by P. Adams Sitney in Visionary Film, *Special Effects* "simply shows the

filmic frame depicted by a broken white line around a rectangular void. Frampton filmed

[3] Hollis Frampton, "Envoi" in *Poetic Justice* (Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1973).
Reprinted in Bruce Jenkins, ed. *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).
[4] Michael Snow, "Hollis Frampton Interviewed by Michael Snow," *Film Culture* 48-49 (Winter & Spring 1970), 11.
[5] Ibid., 11.

this static graphic design with a hand-held telephoto lens from a distance so that the

nervous jittering of his body, as a ground or base for the camera, would be recorded

simultaneously with the universal outline of the frame."[6]
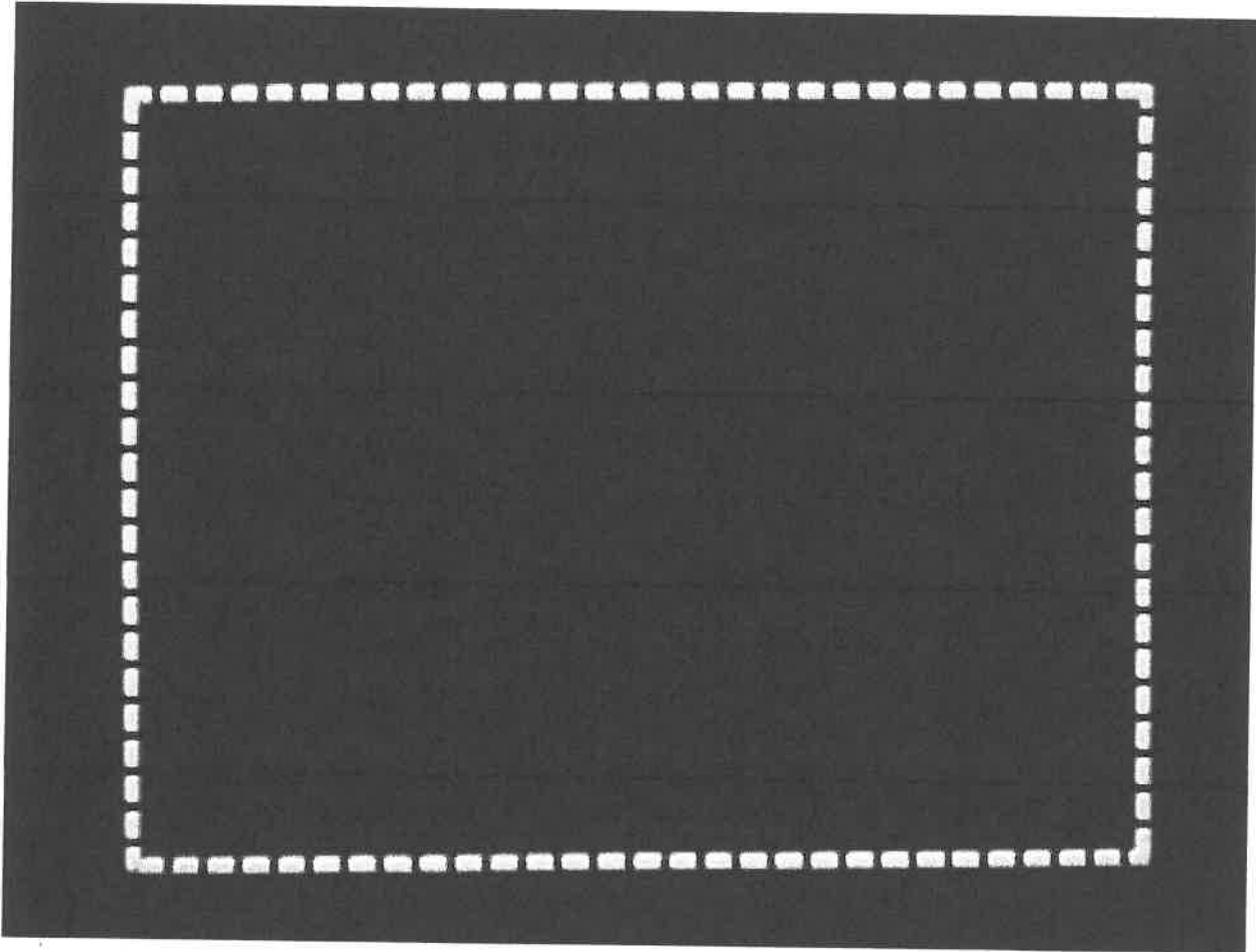
Hollis Frampton, *Special Effects* (1972)

In Frampton's words, "what I was pursuing, and not at any great length, is that

extraordinary determination consciousness seems to have to find meaning, to decode.

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[6] P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 383.

When there is very little to decode, that propensity surfaces."[7] In his notes on the film,

Frampton encourages the participation of his film's viewers, asking of them to "people

this given space, if you will, with images of your own devising."[8]

Frampton, in conversation with Scott MacDonald, said that "one of the best remarks I

ever heard about the film was reported to me by someone who was familiar with and

sympathetic to film, who had brought a friend. The friend, who had seen little film, said

that as he watched Special Effects, he wondered what the dotted line was about, and it

occurred to him that it was to show where the movie would be if there were any."[9]

(Screen *Special Effects*, 10 minutes)

I wouldn't want to make the claim, nor, I think, would he, that Frampton is a particularly

gifted synthesizer player. In his own words – the synthesizer was "a splendid toy to play

with" and "something to improvise on."[10] That said, I really like this soundtrack – I

mean, I find it really humorous – mostly for the way that it vibrates and pulses, almost

compulsively – which, to me, makes it seem something like an amplified track of a

troubled digestive system. It foregrounds the physical nature of the vibrating body, or

something completely internal and embodied.

Frampton described the soundtrack as "pure synthesizer work (not a very complicated

patch) made on a Buchla in Pittsburgh. It was one of the first times I used one. It's

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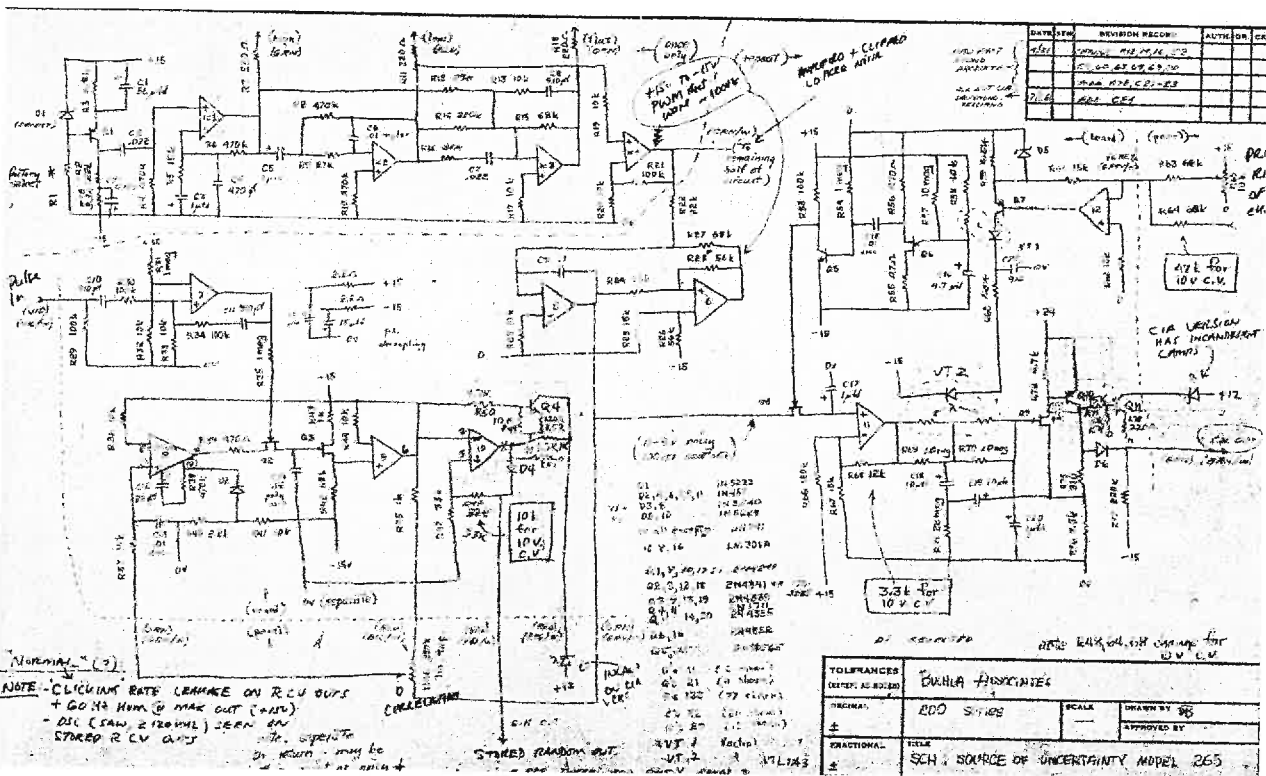[7] Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 71.

[8] Film-makers Cooperative Catalogue, no.6, page 91.

[9] Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 72.

[10] Audio recording of Frampton made at London Film-makers' Co-op, May 1972 (Harvard Film Archive collection, item number 11054).

quasi-musical and not acoustical – not made by rubbing something onto something or hitting something or blowing into something. There are moments when it suggests repetitive vocal sounds: laughter or shrieks. I wanted a track that had a certain degree of ambiguity and never resolved itself one way or another."[11]

One of the unique and inherent aspects of the Buchla synthesizer, which doesn't use a standard musical keyboard, but rather a series of touch plates that do not correspond to standard Western tuning systems, was Don Buchla's propensity for creatively naming its sequence conventions and function generators – one, a randomness module, which controlled both random and stepped voltage was given the rather amazing name the "Source of Uncertainty."

Drawn schematic for the "Soure of Uncertainty" module

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[11] Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 72.

The sound of *Special Effects*, whether or not it was generated via the use of the "Source of Uncertainty" sequence is unmistakably a machine-sound – not the sound of the cinematic apparatus of projection, as in *Maxwell's Demon*, but perhaps, the machine-noise of a speculative and uncertain or projected cinematic future. The quality of this particular, and un-mistakably Buchla-sound in conjunction with the jerky subjective view of this sketched out frame (which Frampton described as implying that the film is, indeed, a "made-thing"[12]) makes the film feel completely embodied and personal, yet full of a sense of possibility.

Before Frampton had finished the film, he screened it in draft form at Yale in December 1971 with the title *Cascade*. He said that, while the film would be finished with a "black gate" image – a black frame outlined with a white dotted line – he would be showing it, that evening, as a soundtrack accompanied by a open white gate image – the pure white light of an empty projector.[13]
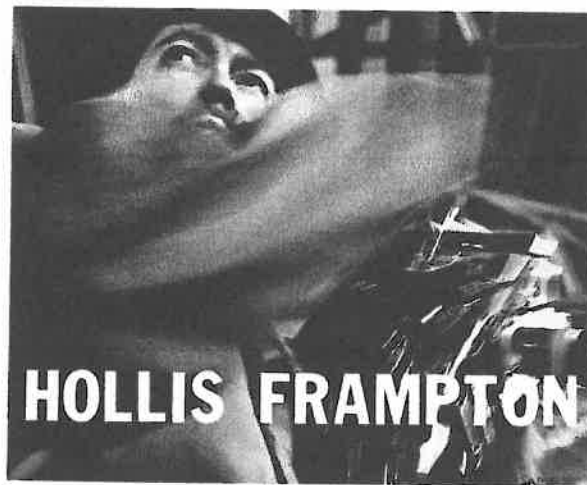
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[12] Audio recording of Frampton made at London Film-makers' Co-op, May 1972 (Harvard Film Archive collection, item number 11054).

[13] Audio recording of Frampton made at Yale University, December 4, 1971 (Harvard Film Archive collection).

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As Bruce Jenkins writes of the film in his 1983 dissertation on Frampton

> "Special Effects offers a quasi-science-fiction rendering of cinema's unknown, uncharted future. The empty frame here serves to signify as yet unmade images, new forms that have yet to emerge on the screen. ... While Nostalgia (the first film in the Hapax cycle) filled the screen with images from Frampton's past, Special Effects necessarily withholds any visual evidence of the future."[14]

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[14] Bruce Jenkins, "The Films of Hollis Frampton: A Critical Study" (PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1983), 284.

I would add that, while Special Effects certainly does withhold a certain kind of visual look to the future, the minimalism of the drafted frame within the frame, that place waiting to be filled with images, is counteracted by the tweaking riffs, blurps, descending electronic glissandos, and, well, complete excess of the soundtrack. The possibilities of new sound generating technologies that are divorced from the musical instruments of the past aren't used here for the creation of referential "special effects" in the manner that Russolo's rumorarmonio were, but are rather used to sketch out what an embodied experience of looking and listening in the future might feel like. *Special Effects*, coming at the end of over three hours of incredible dense material, after *(nostalgia)*, *Poetic Justice*, *Critical Mass*, *Traveling Matte*, *Ordinary Matter*, and *Remote Control*, proposes a complex opening up of "the end", perhaps a mediated and framed-out future – one in which technologies are embodied, or in which bodies are mediated by technological interventions.

I'd hate to make the claim that the sound of *Special Effects* is somehow indicitive of the sounds of the future, but I would like to argue that it is not just the empty void of the bouncing, sketched-out visual frame that allows for this sense of a future of open possibility, but that the sounds of *Special Effects*, the sounds born from the "Source of Uncertainty", contribute equally to the films effective ambiguity.

I would like to conclude by quoting at length from Frampton, in conversation with Peter Gidal in 1972, as he describes a position he proposed for an alternative cinema, in his words, to get an argument going at Millenium in 1966.

"Taking the view that cinema was the youngest of the arts, I proposed a cinema of 'special effects' that would be a cinema of the ear, popularly known as music. If music is only the cinema of the ear, sound ordered in time to perceptual ends, we could say that the cinema of the eye is light ordered in time to perceptual ends. Then, of course, cinema becomes the oldest of the arts. Hundreds of millions of years old . . . a cinema of the ear. Remember now, we're clear out at the other end of history at this point, and that 350 million years have gone toward bringing music to its present form. It may seem very brief when we contemplate the other cinemas that I anticipate."[15]

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[15] Gidal, *Interview with Hollis Frampton*, 105.